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AUTHOR Malbon, Ralph
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ABSTRACT

The paper covers two main themes. The first theme considers what should be done about branch libraries, in the rapidly changing conditions of today, for the greater efficiency and economy of library service. The author suggests that there are too many small branch libraries in the towns and cities in England. The author recommends that the library authorities should concentrate their resources solely for the improvement of the large district libraries, those which are located in obviously important sub-areas, far enough from the town center to warrant their existence. Small, ineffective, badly situated branch libraries should be closed. The second theme considers how librarians can plan library service for the future in the forthcoming local government revolution. (MM)

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PRODUCTIVITY IN
BRANCH LIBRARIES
TODAY, AND THE FUTURE.

by Ralph Malbon, F.L.A.,
City Librarian, Portsmouth.

Based on a paper presented at a joint
meeting of the Branch and Mobile libraries
Group, Wessex Division of A.A.L., and the
South-Western Branch of the Library Association.

Occasional papers number four

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I am going to talk on two themes, firstly what I think we should be doing about our branch libraries, in the rapidly changing conditions of today, for the greater efficiency and economy of our service and, secondly, how we can plan our service for the future, that is to say, in the forthcoming local government revolution.

By way of introduction to my first theme I want to say, quite directly, that we have far too many small branch libraries in our towns and cities in this country (I am not qualified to speak on county branch libraries, so I will not) and that library authorities ought to concentrate their resources solely for the improvement of the large district libraries, those which are located in obviously important sub-areas, far enough from the town centre to warrant their existence. What I have said implies that the small, ineffective, badly situated branch library should be closed. This seems obvious and the tendencies can be seen there already; but it is easier said than done.

On the second theme my preliminary comment is that we have had a harvesting of Local Government White Papers of late. This last one, which came out the other day baffles me more than did the others. The only certain factors so far (though we shall know more soon) is that there are to be two tiers (though we must not call them tiers). At the moment it looks as though Education is to go into the first tier, and it looks as though libraries are to go either under, with, or in liaison with, Education; much more has to be said on this, although I for one welcome a closer link with Education in some respects, which I will outline as I go along.

PRODUCTIVITY TODAY

Let me then commence with my first theme, re-organising branch libraries and producing more economies with more efficiency. It seems a paradox and yet I believe that something can be done and I believe that up and down the country we should now be looking at branch libraries as a fruitful source of economy and improved efficiency.

You will notice that I said fruitful. What puts most senior librarians off when asked to economise is that this merely seems to mean reductions in service.

Ask a librarian to cut out a branch library and he sees this as a diminishing of his system. Quite rightly so. This is what we have all been taught to think, just as we have fought for the appointment of professional librarians at all service points, on grounds of best possible service to the public and incidentally of our prestige.

The O and M people in one of our northern cities caught a cold when they advocated some years ago, if I remember aright, the closing of all branch libraries at tea-time, among other things, for economy reasons. There was a hue and cry and a consequent retraction.

A couple of years ago hundreds of people besieged the Council Chambers in Newark, U.S.A., when the Council decided to close the libraries and sack the 300 personnel as a measure of economy at rate-fixing time. There was an immediate nation-wide repercussion, the strength of which caused the Council of Newark to abandon their ideas and to protest that they were merely testing local opinions: I can think of several like cases. Obviously a moribund service should be shut down, especially when alternatives are available. I have closed down branch libraries and ceased a mobile service without a murmur of public protest. The lesson is that if you close libraries or reduce services, you have to be sure that what you are doing is right and reasonable and that it seems so to the general public and the press, as well as Committee and Council.

If we do this exercise of looking at some of our branch libraries, of deciding whether we ought to close some of them, or run them part-time, or streamline the service, what do we hope to gain? A saving on the rates and the thanks of the County or Borough Treasurer? Like any other set of workers, we need an incentive, something fruitful, something to make us move, something to encourage us to look closer at our methods and motives in order to find those economies and to improve efficiency.

It is probably only when one becomes a library manager that one develops a mean grasping streak, though a chief librarian is not normally driven to economies by his own committee members these days. On the contrary, they will encourage the chief librarian to do all that is possible, they are all in favour of bigger and better services and they will actively sponsor the

chief's ideas and recommend appropriate courses of action to the Finance Committee of the Council. And nowadays they must do it more loudly and strongly than hitherto, for with the advent of Maud and Mallaby, Finance Committees have widely accreted to themselves the power to determine library policy and do not leave, as hitherto, the Library Committee to finalise without interference its own schemes if it can get the money. And so, it becomes more than ever necessary for the Library Committee to state its priorities clearly and eloquently to the Finance and Policy Committee in order to compete on at least equal terms with other Committees who are doing the same thing in the fight for the limited amount of money available. For it is all really in the final analysis a question of money.

Getting money for the service is an art. There are no text books on it and so far as I know no chief has ever imparted his secret of success, if indeed he has ever achieved success.

It is of no use nowadays to ask for twice as much as you can possibly do with, and hope to get half. That used to work in some cases, but for various reasons, quite apart from ethical considerations, cannot be relied upon today. Similarly, it is of no use to present vast amounts of carefully culled statistics to prove a need. In the first place statistics are suspect, secondly they are not read at all and thirdly the need gets lost among the figures.

One way to success, some chief librarians find, is by the slogan method, that is, a simple repetition of important needs, using the same words and phrases over and over again until the stage is reached that the Committee is reciting them as if they were the Catechism. But now we librarians are on the verge of a better way, a way that Management Service Officers and Treasurers accept and acknowledge because it is the new understanding, the modern thinking. Its name is Productivity and its handmaiden Priorities and Objectives. I am not dealing in crystal balls: this is with us today; we must use this new weapon, this veritable two-edged sword.

We are all aware of what productivity does. We know, that if workers produce more, the modern idiom has it that they share in the extra profits. I have been engaged in an incentive bonus scheme for our manual

workers in the library bindery, whereby they may, if we arrive at a happy conclusion, receive an enhanced rate based upon the maintenance of an agreed output. There are other variations upon this theme of productivity in reverse current in the country, such as enabling a rise of say 10% for manual workers, or those who remain on the staff after 10% savings in costs and by what is called natural wastage has been obtained.

These things have so far been largely confined to manual workers, but the process is without a doubt immediately adaptable to clerical and professional staff and to the services we administer. Indeed, for me the trend is set for the first time in my 17 years a chief. I have been able, this year, by diligent practical economy to find a saving of £2,000 from a number of small items on this year's Probable Actual expenditure. My incentive in carrying out this exercise, instead of as usual ensuring that the year's money was spent somehow, somewhere, was that I was told that any savings found could be placed to future credit. It has gone to swell the forthcoming year's book fund.

We should ensure that when we save, the money saved is used in more essential ways. In other words, when we are looking for savings on the library service what we are doing should be not merely economising, but establishing more clearly our priorities.

Here I would like to quote what I heard Dr. Mohlenbrok say, when he addressed the Library Association Conference a few years ago; when he was appointed City Librarian of Gothenberg he was told that money would be available for all his plans, so long as he reduced expenditure through efficiency in order to provide the improved service.

The average small full-time branch library in a town costs about £8,000 a year to run. I say, quite flatly, that if a branch library, part of a town service where there is a central library, is not issuing 100,000 books a year, it simply isn't worth keeping open full-time, or perhaps at all. It needs the same heating, lighting, cleaning, general upkeep and staffing as a library twice as busy. If it were closed there is an immediate economy of £8,000 a year. Put it all into the book fund. Now of course I only said that for effect. There isn't an immediate economy. The books are transferable, and there are no immediate redundancies; staff

would come under the natural wastage clause I mentioned earlier. But there should accrue benefits to the service in more important areas in due course, areas which need themselves to be recognised and established.

There are still far too many small branch libraries all over the country which were built to satisfy a need which has now ebbed away. There are also quite a number of, shall we say, mistakes which have never been covered up. There are branch libraries built in the horse and cart days, which though used to some extent cannot justify their existence in this modern era of easy transport.

We chiefs tend to leave them alone. It makes for a quiet life. We none of us want to actually reduce our service. It seems a defeatist attitude to adopt, unpopular and nothing to gain from it at all.

On every side, there must be branch libraries which are not fulfilling a useful purpose, or giving a complete service, but we keep them open full-time for sixty hours a week, and we say to ourselves that if only we had the money to improve the book stock then surely they would be busier. The libraries I am thinking of are not large enough to be district libraries; they may be located in small separate neighbourhoods and we say they cannot be allowed to go as they represent all that there is of a cultural nature in those neighbourhoods. Libraries such as these exist fairly plentifully in the sub-areas of our towns. They are too busy to warrant replacement by a mobile library (we think) and they nevertheless cannot possibly give a full service, because the demand isn't there.

What do so many of these small, under-used, yet seemingly not disposable branch libraries do? Well, they don't give an information service, nor is there a demand for one. They faithfully keep Whitaker's Almanack (that first discovery of every Reference Librarian) railway time-tables, Encyclopaedia Britannica, less, and the Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, in these little branch libraries and they are not used. They advertise a direct telephone link with the Central Reference Library to answer any little query, and no-one uses it. They provide a comfortable place for readers of the newspapers and the popular periodicals and a few old folks use it all right and appreciate it. Is this their purpose? Maybe it is, but was it intended that

this should be the purpose of the branch library? They provide a service of light recreational reading; eighty or ninety per cent of the issues are fiction, which forms the backbone of the service given. We can all do this without fear of competition. People don't buy novels that they can borrow free, and we librarians have long since closed Boots', Smith's and Mudie's lending libraries, not to mention the little commercial library in the local corner shop newsagents, which used to do the same job at 6d per book per week. If we stopped doing it what would be left? The little commercial library would perhaps re-appear. I am reminded here that the Library Association Conference once passed a resolution recommending the limitation of fiction in public libraries. That was at the Manchester Conference in 1879! May I add, as an aside, that with librarians the argument about issuing light fiction still continues and who am I to say that the issuing of light fiction should not still continue? Do we not in the last resort give the people what they want? We talk about giving people what they need but in the end it is what they ask for that counts, for this is in the nature of our jobs; though we do anticipate demand and we provide in default of demand.

These small branch libraries provide a pretty good children's library for children who use it to supplement their own schools' library service. Of course the ones who come in are the keen ones, the best readers. Whilst on the subject I have a few thoughts about children's libraries. I welcome the new local government (1971) White Paper for the opportunities that are offered nation-wide for really close collaboration between library and schools. Instead of these children's libraries in public branch libraries let there be in the primary schools an equivalent library, open after school and on Saturdays, staffed by part-timers, supervised by our qualified children's librarians. I throw this out as a possible economy for the future, as a more efficient method of supplying young children who generally in towns are within easy reach of their schools and who mostly walk there. I see no harm, and much good in a child doing all his reading within the scope of school and giving him fun with his education.

Older children of secondary age are now in three streams as it were, secondary modern, secondary technical and secondary grammar, but are rapidly being absorbed into the comprehensive school organisation. A large fully equipped library will certainly exist in these

comprehensive schools. Why not open it in the evenings and on Saturdays and make it part of the new educational set up envisaged in the White Paper? We have always found the adolescent a problem. He tends to leave our public libraries at fourteen, for one reason or another. We produce our teenage libraries to retain him but such an approach as the one I am outlining will, I am sure, be an improvement and what's more in the new environment of the White Paper is a likely departure. I realise that this point could do with enlargement, but I have not time in the scope of this address for this. I am, to be brief, thinking that the public library will, in the new style marriage of education with libraries, do less of the liaisoning of today, will really run the libraries in the schools of tomorrow. Today we find an easy regular influx of classes of primary school children in our public libraries to be shown how it all works and to encourage their reading; tomorrow it will be instead, in the main, classes of secondary school children, or those in their last years, who will be processed in this way, and special facilities for this final year of learning will be required. I am aware that we all do something of the sort to some extent now, but in my mind's eye I see some much more intensive treatment in the future.

All right, perhaps we can't in the end close all the small branch libraries that we know are giving a dubious service. We can all think of good practical reasons for not so doing, like for instance the vociferousness of local democratic expression, small perhaps but loud none the less. No good telling people that fifty per cent of library users travel to their branch libraries by car on a Saturday and why don't they travel a little further to the district library: one of the factors keeping small branch libraries alive in their little backwaters is that car parking is easy.

If we can't close at present, this is when we have to streamline. We can only look for genuine economies that don't hurt the service, for reductions in service that don't backfire! Let me briefly deal with a number of economies which can perhaps be made, which perhaps you may already be doing, which in themselves can be regarded as making for efficiency.

First of all, opening hours. Let us make them more in line with needs, and while we are at it simplify our time sheets and reduce our costs. Do we really need to open in the mornings? Should we instead remain open

later in the evenings utilising our gallant part-time ladies to run the late night shift? Are there some days - perhaps early closing day of shops - when little business is done in the library? No good making arbitrary judgments, we must keep records of use before we adjust or reduce opening hours and, we must be seen to be giving benefit.

And what about staff? Can we utilise sixth formers on Saturdays to help out at busy times? They are cheap, keen and efficient.

Do we really need qualified librarians in charge of small branch libraries? There are of course professional duties to be done in all branch libraries relating certainly to book stock. Would not a small team of stock editors, peripatetic, but operating from the bibliographical base at the central library, do the necessary work more efficiently, and incidentally cheaper? Matters relating to routine could be controlled by unqualified assistants in charge; naturally there would be a saving in salaries here, but an excellent outlet for at least some promotions for our more senior unqualified staff. We librarians have, traditionally, to ensure that our occupation is regarded as professional, insisted that at every service point there should be a qualified librarian. Indeed it has been said that the fewer books immediately available the more need there was for a qualified librarian, some trained person who can act as the agent and intermediary of the Central Library service. For our small branch libraries at any rate we should re-adjust this sort of approach. Are we not wasting the qualities of our young librarians? We should make the most of their talents and training and spread them around our libraries on the professional tasks. Where perhaps there were ten qualified branch librarians, a travelling team of four might suffice for the professional work at each in turn, and furthermore create a better general book stock and a genuine feeling of job enrichment for all.

What about catalogues and all the expense of their maintenance in small branch libraries? I did away with them in the Midlands, at nine branch libraries, and apart from the occasional complaint from a teacher wanting to show his visiting class the working of the catalogue, nobody notices. The staff know that if a subject or a book is not represented on the shelf, it might as well be in Timbuctoo for all the good the catalogue is in a small branch library. The reservation system, and in urgent

cases the telephone, takes care of this, as it does anywhere anyway. One or two bibliographical works in a small branch library may lead the staff to feel that they are doing some professional work and occasionally they can improve upon readers' vague requests for central's benefit. But even basic bibliographies are vastly expensive especially at each branch library and in any case if there is an urgency the telephone call to central and the range of bibliographical resources is better. Not that the public often make urgent demands in this way in small branch libraries.

And by the way what about unnecessary records? There are no branch library records that can't go in a Boots Diary, the lot of them.

Another economy, indeed an extension of service, and an opportunity for those members of the public who really want to help others, might be the inauguration of say a Friends of the Library Society in our branch libraries. In all our areas there are housebound people, hospitals, old folks' homes, blind people for whom a personal service is all the more welcome when it is voluntary. Perhaps we ought to try to enroll far more voluntary help than we do. I cannot help thinking that it would be forthcoming. They do more of this in America at present than we do. Let me quote what the Society of Friends of the Library in Illinois are doing now. They are, voluntarily, reading to housebound folk (not merely delivering books) transporting the elderly and handicapped to the library, operating a hospital book cart, conducting story hours for children, arranging suitable displays to co-ordinate with library programmes, acting as library tour guides, arranging art shows and conducting lend-lease gallery operations. Arranging special events during vacation times and National Library Week. Providing baby sitting service for young mothers attending lectures or classes at the library.

I remember reading last year that in Cleveland, U.S.A., I believe, a special free 'bus service circulates the city stopping at large district libraries and the central library and returning to starting points on the edge of the city boundary. Perhaps the cost of this service in larger towns in this country would be less than the continued maintenance of small branch libraries.

Let us grasp this nettle firmly. Let us dispose of the moribund little libraries which are eating out our

hearts mostly in wastelands, with the incentive, previously in assurance obtained, that their sale will benefit the library budget, preferably the book fund for the betterment of the service generally. Let us talk to our treasurers, and to our Management Service Officers and negotiate our library productivity agreement by reappraisal of library objectives and priorities.

I and my senior staff have over the last year or so been subjected to a course on Management by Objectives, where one has to identify the important factors in one's job and place them in order of priority. It is a much more difficult task than at first appears, and to operate properly demands about sixteen hours of discussion between say a departmental head and his chief. If we can cut or reduce in some way expenditure on small branch libraries - assuming we are able to use the savings - what then is our first priority? The Book Fund? New staff posts? Central Library extensions? Enlargement of district libraries? Do we put the continuance of ineffective small branch libraries before these?

THE FUTURE

I could go on, but I must now resort to my second theme which is necessarily shorter, being one of speculation into the future of branch, and indeed all, libraries in the new era. And here I shall be on uneasy ground. You have only to glance through the professional periodicals of twenty years ago - or indeed twenty months ago - to become aware of the dangers of prophecy.

When we first start work in libraries we all operate routine library duties, if only for a short time; when qualified as chartered librarians we think of ourselves as specialising, we become bibliographical assistants, or in charge of small branch libraries; one more jump up the ladder and we become departmental heads and then if we want to go further we must cease gradually to be librarians and become managers. It's the same in every occupation. Our librarianship qualifications don't equip us any more, though they should. As managers we begin to plan for other people, to organise all manner of things for the future, and very often what we do then is vital for the service. For if we do not direct the staff under us to operate the service efficiently then we have failed as managers. If we have the aptitude and the nerve, we succeed - for what we are managing we understand, because we have learnt it from the grass roots.

We have all seen the sudden burgeoning of the Director of Social Service, that hybrid of the Welfare, Children's and Personal Health Services. Have you seen the beginnings in our own field - the Director of Recreation and Leisure? There was one in last week's advertisements in the Times. This I think will be the first of many. A Director for the Museums, Art Galleries, Public Libraries, Public Baths, Parks and Entertainments. Not running these departments, but co-ordinating their work for the enrichment of a community service, in the same style as that of the new Social Services. For these new posts, management training alone will not do, Public Relations Officer or Entertainment Officer training won't suffice for the running of Community Relations work, Arts Centres and Festivals, perhaps expositions, sports occasions and so on. We librarians are the most obvious of all the present possible choices for these jobs of the future, though we need specialised management training, and this of a kind which is devoted to community service. We shall soon be faced with the need for it; if we are to succeed in our new role, we must learn again. We mustn't expect library schools to help; their experience is less than any in this new departure, and perhaps they are not even concerned at this point. But how do you co-ordinate all these separate, if related in some respects, departments?

Naturally a new breed of manager will spring up in due course, from the departmental ranges of any of the services I have mentioned. Selected departmental heads will be hand-picked according to their suitability for the new managerial posts. Training will come, but as usual, much later.

Now if libraries are going with education, is this a right step to take? A Director of Recreation and Leisure with Education? I believe this is right. I think most people believe that libraries should go with education, though when they say this, they usually mean, rather than with entertainment, with amenities, and they usually think of extra-mural or non-vocational education, of cultural and educational activities. But Education has solid links already with Parks and Entertainments and with the Public Baths (as well as those in schools) and it seems reasonable to me at present at any rate that libraries, in particular our district branch libraries, should form an important cultural part in this new all-embracing idea of a Department of

Recreation and Leisure which will cover a multitude of co-ordinated functions.

We have always thought of ourselves, we librarians, as being more akin to extra-mural education than amenities and recreation, and yet as part of a new composite set-up either under, with, or in extension of, Education Departments, who already have an existing link with Parks and Entertainments and with Public Baths and Museums and Art Galleries, there will be a new powerful combination all for the good of the community.

There will be a certain re-organisation of Regional Arts Associations and more direct liaison with local Arts Councils. New Central Libraries are already including Arts Centres as part of normal facilities, to provide a communal roof for all our local educational and cultural societies, which are the backbone of, or indeed all that exists, of culture in our towns today.

And yet, how odd, a glance at the disposition in the two tiers of local government services in the latest White Paper puts education with libraries in the top tier. And separates Museums, Art Galleries, Parks, Entertainments and Baths from them in the second tier.

But libraries are in the forefront of the local service. They are what the general public thinks of as the most popular local government department. It is from our large branch libraries that a welter of community work must ensue. From them will operate services to old folks' homes, jails and hospitals. In them will be headquarters for local societies, exhibitions, Citizens' Advice Bureaux and so on. These are essentially local services normally operating within a range of a few miles around each branch library. Is all this to be supervised from some first tier pinnacle?

I cannot help but think that current ideas, both of the nature of education service and of library service will change. Education will reach much further than hitherto into the field of non-vocational education, of cultural activities. The library service (or will it be called the resources service?) will carry out these duties. Children's and School libraries will merge. Librarians will enter more and more as of right into school life and curricula. Comprehensive schools will increasingly contain larger and more comprehensive libraries; some of the librarians that were in our

branch libraries will, instead, be in the schools but will be none the less part of the public library structure. The district libraries, much more than at present, will become headquarters for local cultural societies, and the old theme of Community Centre will re-appear stronger and more clearly. If small part-time branch libraries have not disappeared the effect of the new White Paper will cause their demise, I feel, because of the increased trend towards community service and the need to concentrate resources.

I cannot believe, though, that education will be, or should be, a first tier service alone, because of its traditional local character, and I cannot think that libraries will not be mainly a second tier service, except perhaps for financial organisation purposes, so that they can combine as an ingredient within the educational sphere with Museums, Art Galleries, Parks, Entertainments and Baths to provide what I regard as an essential of the future, a complete comprehensive community service of cultural activities - recreation and leisure - analagous with the new Social Service. This to me seems so logical and reasonable and it's what I feel everybody who has thought seriously about it has expected to happen.

What I have said, or intended to say, amounts briefly to this. I foresee, willy nilly, a drastic reduction in the number of branch libraries, in towns at any rate, to enable a concentration of resources on central libraries and important district libraries in the light of today's changing conditions and in preparation for the revolution of tomorrow. All senior librarians, not just chiefs, should make every effort now to harness the inherent benefits of productivity and incentives in the library field in order to re-allocate the money available on to the most important factors. We can do this now by establishing our main priorities of our new policies as soon as the future of local government is settled - and that looks like being this year - and finally we should look at the fundamental nature of our work and start considering and perhaps re-evaluating what is meant by the terms educational service, cultural service, vocational service, recreational service and amenity service. Are they really all the same thing?

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